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Chapter 1

Defining and Overcoming Internet Addiction in a Nutshell

The interesting thing about the word *addiction* is that technically it isn't really a medical term or diagnosis. Although used by nearly everyone, both clinicians and the public, it's more of a popularized term used to describe a set of behaviors or a syndrome. Official diagnostic terms for substance and behavioral addictions include *substance use disorder*, *alcohol use disorder*, *pathological gambling*, and *Internet gaming disorder*. For the purposes of this book, the term *addiction* is used for ease and simplicity.

Most people confuse an addiction with physical dependence. Physical dependence occurs when the body gets used to a substance, be it alcohol or drugs. It is characterized by a tolerance to that substance and then withdrawal when the substance is discontinued. Essentially, the body's receptors for that drug become accustomed to having it in the system. When it's no longer available, there are physical and psychological symptoms that we call withdrawal.



REMEMBER

Addiction is more typically defined as a pathological or compulsive use disorder. This means that when you use a substance or engage in a repetitive behavior (such as Internet use or video gaming), significant negative effects are created in your life. Despite these negative effects, the user cannot easily stop or may not think they need to stop. This distortion of reality is often inherent to addiction and is also known as denial.

We all engage in pleasurable behaviors and at times take substances that are pleasure inducing. Take alcohol, for instance. Alcohol is a legal psychoactive substance that has long been associated with pleasurable sensations, but unfortunately, it is also known for its addictive potential. Many pleasurable substances and behaviors can produce an addictive response due to their activation of the reward circuitry in the brain.



REMEMBER

There is some confusion over whether *intoxication* and/or *withdrawal* described in alcohol or substance use is also experienced in behavioral addictions such as gambling, food, sex, or the Internet. Clarifying this issue isn't necessary to recognize behavioral addictions, however. Addiction is not simply the intoxication or withdrawal we get from a substance or behavior. It is the creation of a potential set of behaviors and life-impacting consequences reflecting a complex biopsychosocial process. We call it *biopsychosocial* because it affects our physical health as well as our social and emotional life.

This chapter introduces you to Internet and screen addiction, how to recognize it, and how to get help.

Defining Behavioral Addiction

There is some confusion about what causes an addiction; this confusion often occurs because of the physiological response of tolerance and withdrawal from drugs or alcohol. But what about gambling? With gambling, you aren't ingesting anything, yet you see all the same markers and consequences of addiction, including an impact on social relationships and psychological functioning, as well as on work, legal issues, finances, health, or academic performance.

Gambling addiction (the official medical diagnosis is *pathological gambling*) is part of a group of addictions called *process* or *behavioral addictions*; the American Society of Addiction Medicine, in part, defines addiction as the use of a substance or behavior that causes *negative* and *deleterious* life consequences:

Addiction is characterized by inability to consistently abstain, impairment in behavioral control, craving, diminished recognition of significant problems

with one's behaviors and interpersonal relationships, and a dysfunctional emotional response. Like other chronic diseases, addiction often involves cycles of relapse and remission.



REMEMBER

The complex process of addiction almost always involves disruption of reward patterns, motivation, compulsion, executive function, and judgment, but it may not include the physical withdrawal symptoms seen in drug or alcohol dependence.

Understanding How and Why People Get Addicted to Screens and the Internet

So, what about the Internet? And how exactly do you become addicted to a digital screen connected to the Internet? Well, the answer is not all that different from how you become addicted to other behaviors and substances. Part of what happens with screen use (when linked to the Internet) is that you're accessing content that is stimulating and rewarding to you, but because the delivery mechanism of this digital drug is variable (meaning you don't know what you will get, when you will get it, and how desirable it will be for you), your brain receives a variably rewarding experience. Each time you get a reward, you receive a small hit of dopamine in your mid-brain (also called the limbic system). This unpredictability, or *maybe* factor, is very resistant to extinction or, putting it another way, addictive.

This is the same way that addiction to gambling works, and that is why you can think of the Internet as the "world's largest slot machine." Each time you pull the handle on a slot machine or click your mouse, you might win; with gambling, you might win some money — on the Internet, you might win some form of desirable content.

Screen technology is essentially doing the same thing that drugs, alcohol, and gambling do. Obviously, there are differences between the various types of addictions, but the underlying neurobiology is essentially the same. You tend to repeat behaviors that are pleasurable, and the perception of that pleasure is often unconscious and largely biological; the impacts these addictive patterns have are more often behavioral and psychological, but the underpinnings of all addictions are neurobiological.

Many people can experience the excitement and rewards of the Internet and most forms of digital content with few problems, although you will frequently hear people complain about how *addicted* they feel to their smartphones, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit, Twitter, pornography, video games,

YouTube, and even streaming sites such as Amazon Prime, Hulu, and Netflix. The reality is that some people are unable to limit their use of these forms of online content, and because the Internet delivery system operates on a variable reinforcement schedule, the brain gets used to the *maybe* factor that helps produce the addictive response. The pleasure part of the brain responds with increases in dopamine, and the unpredictability of *what, how much, and when* helps create a digital addictive experience. Obviously, the content you might *like* and respond *favorably to* will vary, but the Internet has *so much* available content that it is easy to understand why many people feel addicted to their screens (the reality is that many people are overusing their screens, but may not be addicted).



REMEMBER

It's perhaps important to note here that feeling addicted to your screen may not mean that you are. Many of us are aware of our overuse of our screens, but it may not have risen to a point that meets addiction criteria. Nevertheless, it can be a lifestyle problem that you should address by making some changes in *how* and *when* you use your Internet technology. Find out about signs and symptoms of Internet and screen addiction later in this chapter.



REMEMBER

Addiction represents an extreme problem with a drug or behavior, but it has different levels of severity just like any illness or behavioral health problem. The levels of addiction can range from mild to severe, with each level representing more significant negative impacts on your behavior and functioning. At the lowest level of impact, you might be overusing your technology and screens to a point where you're eating up too much time and energy that might be better spent on other tasks and activities. At the most extreme level, there are people whose lives have been severely impacted and limited by their screen use. It is perhaps fair to say that most of us (at times) fall into some level of overuse, abuse, or addiction to Internet technology.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

The American Society of Addiction Medicine gives the following more complete definition of addiction:

Addiction is a primary, chronic disease of brain reward, motivation, memory, and related circuitry. Dysfunction in these circuits leads to characteristic biological, psychological, social, and spiritual manifestations. This is reflected in an individual pathologically pursuing reward and/or relief by substance use and other behaviors. Addiction is characterized by inability to consistently abstain, impairment in behavioral control, craving, diminished recognition of significant problems with one's behaviors and interpersonal relationships, and a dysfunctional emotional response. Like other chronic diseases, addiction often involves cycles of relapse and remission. Without treatment or engagement in recovery activities, addiction is progressive and can result in disability or premature death.

Digging into Digital Devices and the Internet

Today, digital screen devices reflect a wide range of technologies and include iPhones and Android smartphones; iPads, Kindles, and other tablets; laptop and desktop computers; and streaming devices and smart TVs. These days, it's very difficult to find something that isn't directly or wirelessly linked to the Internet. You likely almost always have easy access to an Internet connection portal, which increases your overall risk for developing an addiction or unhealthy Internet use habits.



WARNING

All digital devices have the power to rob you of your time and attention, and this imbalance creates problems.

The power of, and attraction to, the Internet comes from its ability to connect people with other people, information, and services. This has essentially changed the way we live our lives; however, the most powerful aspect of the Internet is its addictive potential. The way the Internet works can lead to increases in the amount of time you spend online, irrespective of the specific content you consume.



REMEMBER

The Internet is neither good nor bad — it's amoral. It has no feelings in its power to captivate you. However, you should always keep in mind that the only goal of everything online is to *capture and hold your attention*. It's not necessarily a nefarious intention, but nevertheless, it's a potent force whose purpose is to keep you screen-bound (for largely economic reasons). The only way out of the black hole of the Internet is to take back control of your time and attention.



REMEMBER

Smartphones are the world's smallest slot machines. Their ease of access and availability make them highly addictive Internet access portals. And making smartphones even more addictive are the *notifications* they provide you. Each time you receive a notification of some type, your brain registers a triggering signal that a desirable message, information, or content is waiting for you. This facilitates your continually picking up and checking your phone all day long. There are estimates that many of you pick up your phone a hundred times or more a day! The activation of possibly finding something pleasurable when you're checking is *even more* rewarding than the content itself. Nothing is more intoxicating than *maybe*.

See Chapter 2 in Book 7 for more information on the addictiveness of smartphones and the Internet.

Recognizing the Threats

How do you know whether your *digital device* has become your *digital vice*? This isn't an easy question to answer, as everyone has their own personal values about time and everyone is different in terms of how much disruption is tolerable in their lives. Your technology use is often in part determined by your values around how you use your time and the consciousness you bring to your Internet screen use.

The idea that your screen use typically occurs below your conscious radar is well established. *Time distortion* and *dissociation* are common when you are on your screen, so it's very likely that you don't actually know how much time passes when you're staring at your Instagram or Facebook account, or circling down the rabbit hole on Reddit, or caught in an endless YouTube playlist or Netflix binge.

The first step in recognizing your Internet use is to become conscious of how much *content* you're consuming, and to become aware of exactly how much *time* you have unknowingly surrendered to your device. This is perhaps easier said than done, in that most of the time on your device may be spent without a thought, with little awareness that you have begun a slow descent into the electronic sink-hole of the Internet.

The following sections briefly cover addictive platforms and technologies.

Social media

What exactly is social media? Chapter 3 in Book 7 explains that *social media* is a broad category of applications and websites that are structured around the idea of connecting people, organizations, or businesses around themes, content, or interest areas. Although there are several well-known social media sites, the definition of social media has also expanded to include newer apps and websites that attract users' time and attention. Some examples of social media sites are Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, Reddit, Snapchat, Vine, Twitter, and YouTube, and even travel sites such as Waze and Yelp have a social media component; undoubtedly, countless social applications are integrated into other apps and websites, as businesses have found that *social sells*.

Some social sites are integrated around news and communication, others focus on video and text, and still others are simply about photos and user life updates, posts, and sharing. Some integrate all of these features. Most are without fees to the user; however, none are free. Most accept advertising, and many sell your user data to others for a variety of purposes.



WARNING

Make no mistake: If you think there are no obvious payment of costs connected to social media, then *you* are the payment! Your eyes and attention form the economic engine that drives social media, and many of these platforms have proven to be both addictive and negatively impactful on a variety of psychological levels.

Streaming audio and video

Consuming audio and video content (including music, podcasts, and audiobooks) has become commonplace; in fact, most of what you consume in terms of music, TV, movies, Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hulu, podcasts, YouTube, Kindle, and so on is essentially in streaming format. Even software is streamed or downloaded, and your data is increasingly held in the cloud (on a company's server) instead of on your devices. Streaming means that information and content is pushed to your device in real time, and you watch, read, or listen to it as it is streamed. Sometimes you can download it onto your device and store it for later use.



WARNING

Although no one would argue against the convenience of consuming your digital entertainment in this manner, there are some inherent problems. One major problem is that many of these streaming sites have default settings, called *autoplay*, for audio or video content to keep going to the next movie, TV show, podcast, or YouTube clip — unless you deliberately turn off that feature. The net effect (no pun intended) is that you can end up watching or listening to a lot more content than you intended to or have time for. The automatic “pushed” nature of the content is equivalent to eating out of a large dish with no ability to measure the portion of food (or digital *content*) you are consuming. See Chapter 4 in Book 7 for more about streaming content.

Video games

Of all the content areas that are consumed on the Internet, video gaming is perhaps the most problematic in terms of negative life consequences. That doesn't mean that video gaming is bad or inherently dangerous; in fact, most people who use video games have no significant problem with them and are able to use games with little or no negative life impact. In other words, they can use them in a moderated manner. However, a small percentage of users (studies suggest between 1 and 10 percent) cannot self-regulate their use and spend inordinate amounts of time on gaming platforms, including handheld devices, consoles, and PC-based systems. Many people have problems with PC-based or console games.

Video games incorporate some very attractive factors that contribute to their addictive potential:

- » They provide stimulating content that is novel, interactive, and dynamic. Games are always evolving, through updates and modifications, to keep the novelty and challenge factor high.
- » When playing a video game, you can experience a level of growing mastery that often creates a sense of accomplishment; you might develop greater efficacy in your skills and a higher ranking in comparison to other users.
- » The game provides a sophisticated variable ratio reinforcement and reward structure (the *maybe* factor), and this structure is modified and changed to maintain user interest and to maximize the dopamine/pleasure response.

All forms of Internet communication facilitate some degree of social connection and group interaction, albeit in a two-dimensional online format, but many video game users find the social component of video gaming to be quite compelling. Many times, gamers are communicating verbally (on a headset) via apps such as Discord or others, and the conversations may not only be about the game being played.

Identifying the Signs and Symptoms of Internet and Screen Addiction

Following is a general list of things to look out for to determine whether you may be suffering from an addiction to the Internet. Sometimes just developing an awareness of what you're doing can increase your self-consciousness enough to cause you to change your habits and patterns. This is a good place to start. Generally, small changes can be valuable, but you can make those changes only if you are really aware of what you're doing.



REMEMBER

Every accomplishment starts with a *goal*, followed by an *assessment* of where you are, and a *plan* for where you want to be:

1. Do you spend more time online on your screen devices (computer, laptop, tablet, smartphone, or smart TV) than you realize?
2. Do you mindlessly pass time on a regular basis by staring at your smartphone, tablet, computer, or smart TV, even when you know there might be better or more productive things to do?

3. Do you seem to lose track of time when on any of your screen devices?
4. Are you spending more time with “virtual friends” as opposed to real people nearby? (Obviously, during the COVID pandemic this is a difficult question.)
5. Has the amount of time you spend on your smartphone or the Internet been increasing?
6. Do you secretly wish you could be a little less wired or connected to your screen devices?
7. Do you regularly sleep with your smartphone under your pillow or next to your bed?
8. Do you find yourself viewing and answering texts, tweets, snaps, posts, comments, likes, IMs, DMs, and emails at all hours of the day and night — even when it means interrupting other things you are doing?
9. Do you text, email, tweet, snap, IM, DM, post, comment, or surf while driving or doing other similar activities that require your focused attention and concentration?
10. Do you at times feel your use of technology decreases your productivity?
11. Do you feel uncomfortable when you accidentally leave your phone or other Internet screen device in your car or at home, if you have no service, or if it is broken?
12. Do you feel reluctant to be without your smartphone or other screen device, even for a short time?
13. When you leave the house, do you typically have your smartphone or other screen device with you?
14. When you eat meals, is your smartphone always part of the table setting?
15. Do you find yourself distracted by your smartphone or other screen devices?

If you answer yes to 50 percent (7 or 8) or more of these questions, then you may want to examine your Internet and screen use.



REMEMBER

Here’s an important disclaimer: It should be noted that no medical or psychiatric diagnosis can be made solely from a written test or screening tool. These Internet and screen addiction diagnostic criteria are intended for educational and informational purposes only and are not a substitute for professional medical advice. If you are concerned about your smartphone, Internet, or screen use, you may want to consult with a licensed mental health or addiction professional with expertise in Internet and technology addiction.



REMEMBER

The main thing to look out for is an *overall lack of awareness* of how much time you are spending on your screens. *The more time, the more likely your life will be out of balance.* The content or app is not the most important thing here; rather, it is the amount of *time* you are diverting from balanced real-time living. The power of the Internet, in part, comes from its ability to dissociate you from real life and to become a digital drug by impacting dopamine levels in your brain.

Recovering from Internet and Screen Addiction

You cannot change anything in your life unless you have honest self-appraisal and feedback. The problem with addiction is that often, *self cannot accurately see self*, and people have a great capacity for denial and self-deception when engaging in addictive behaviors that impact their brain reward centers.

Recovery always begins with honest self-evaluation, often with some objective data to help you accurately see what you're doing online. With substance as well as behavioral addiction, there are well-established methods for assessing over-use and life impacts from an addiction. However, there is no simple answer for how much is too much, nor is there an easy fix. Addiction is complex and involves mind, body, and spirit — impacting many aspects of your functioning; that said, everyone has a different *bottom line* where they can no longer ignore the fact that their screen addiction is hurting their life in some way. The following sections introduce two options for recovery: self-help and professional help.



TIP

One thing you do have with Internet addiction is a *digital footprint*; that is, everything you do online and on your smartphone can be tracked, and you can see how much time you spend, what websites and apps you use, and what content areas you seem to have a problem with. This feedback can be critical in helping you start the process of recovery by seeing what you're doing, much like keeping a record of the foods you eat when attempting to eat better or lose weight. There are many aftermarket apps and programs that can record, track, block, and monitor your Internet and screen use. Most cellphone manufacturers and service providers have apps that offer a great deal of detailed information on your use. Several companies also produce software that you or an IT professional can install on all your screen devices that can give you accurate and detailed data, which provides you with total usage information and any problem content areas.



REMEMBER

Don't be surprised when you look at your usage information and find that it is much greater than you recall it being or that you were aware of. This is normal and is part of that dissociation and time distortion that is discussed earlier in this chapter. It's essential that you get accurate feedback about your use; otherwise, you'll be unable to take control of your screen time.

Exploring self-help options

Self-help options (covered in Chapter 5 of Book 7) have always been a substantive part of any addiction recovery and treatment plan. The most well-known is Alcoholics Anonymous, but there are 12-step and recovery/support programs for nearly every addiction; there are even specific support groups for pornography and sex addiction, including Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, Sex Addicts Anonymous, and Sexaholics Anonymous. There are also many support and self-help groups for Internet and technology addiction. Groups such as Game Quitters, OLG-Anon (On-Line Gamers Anonymous), and others that focus on video gaming and other forms of screen use can be useful, but beware that many of these groups *are themselves* online. Some might argue that this defeats the purpose, but some help is always better than no help, even if it's online. (COVID also gave us new reliance on the utility of telemedicine mental health and addiction treatment.)

Self-help books and resources can be invaluable in making desired changes in any behavior or addiction. In the late 1990s, only one self-help book (*Caught in the Net*, published in 1998 by Dr. Kimberly Young) was available. Now, literally dozens of books and resources have been written, and a great deal of medical and scientific research has been conducted on the subject. A lot more is known about this addiction today than 25 years ago.

Getting professional help



REMEMBER

Sometimes self-help and support groups aren't enough to make the changes you need in your life. Breaking an addiction can be hard, and any behavior change can sometimes be made easier with professional help. Our recommendation would be to find a psychologist, psychiatrist, or therapist who has experience in addiction and addiction medicine, preferably with a background in Internet, video game, or screen addiction. Don't be afraid to ask questions regarding their experience (and expertise) in this area, and be wary of any doctor or therapist who underplays the issue and tells you it isn't a real problem.

Balancing Technology with Real-Time Living

Anything in excess can produce negative health issues, and the Internet and screen technologies are no exception. Health issues relating to screen use have been well established and may involve reduced and poor sleep, increased stress and elevated cortisol, repetitive motion injury, and neck and back problems. There have been reports of thumb, finger, and upper-back problems from excessive screen use, as well as eye strain and difficulties focusing. Some reports of more serious medical issues include elevated blood pressure, blood clots, weight gain from sedentary behavior, and heart-rate issues from dehydration; in extreme cases, people have died.

Health is in large part determined by *balance* in your life; screens and all the content you endlessly consume online may interfere with that balance. But balance is key. It can be hard to maintain because it involves conscious choices, but it is necessary for healthy living. Screen technology is anything but *benign*. It eats up your attention and can rob you of the most important resource in your life — your time — without your even knowing it.

People constantly embrace new technology: faster smartphones, faster processors, bigger and better screens, more apps, and more devices connected to the cloud and running their daily lives. This in some ways represents progress, but in many ways, it is a setback. All this technology requires more and more time and attention to manage, maintain, and learn how to use. How many times have you had to troubleshoot a problem with some digital device, install a new app, or just change your password for the millionth time? It takes time. It takes energy. It takes attention from other, perhaps more meaningful and satisfying parts of your life. All of this attention to tech adds up.



REMEMBER

Sure, all this convenience is wonderful, but is it really making life happier and satisfying? Has all your screen and Internet use really added quality to your life? Just because you can hook up everything in your life to the Internet does not *literally* mean it will improve the quality of your life; you always must ask yourself the question “Will the cost (time) really be worth the ultimate *benefit*?”